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AUTHOR Kaplan, Robert B.
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ABSTRACT

It is contended that there are such things as discourse blocs, and that they are composed of discourse units glued together into a contextuated whole by bloc signals. There are three kinds of structures with which it is necessary to deal in order to discuss coherent discourse: the discourse bloc, the discourse unit, and the bloc signal. Characteristically, a discourse bloc has a stated or implied topic. Topic, whether stated or implied, has a set of characteristics which may be preliminarily identified. Topic is likely to be either definite or generic. While topic often occurs as a complete sentence, it may also occur as a left-dislocated sentence modifier. It is also possible for the topic to occur in direct object position or in the position of postponed subject when subject position is occupied by some mechanism for permitting the subject to be moved to the right of the verb. Four types of definiteness noted by Hawkins are: anaphoric, immediate, occurring in a larger context, and associative. It is likely that all four types also occur with respect to the definite topic. Topic also has a logical function and a discourse function. Implications for language teaching, particularly in the relatively new areas of scientific and technological discourse, are noted. (SW)

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ON THE NOTION OF TOPIC IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE

Robert B. Kaplan
University of Southern California

In a number of publications[1] I have attempted to compile a taxonomy of functions which operate in discourse and which serve as the "glue" that makes it possible for a native speaker to recognize that a given set of discourse units constitutes a discourse bloc rather than a random set of grammatical elements. The problem in such a taxonomy lies in the fact that a good many of the functions described look like syntactic elements operating within a sentence while the truth is that these functions operate intersententially within a discourse.

But, perhaps it is first necessary to establish some common assumptions. Most native speakers of English will recognize that the set on the left[2] below is not a discourse bloc while the set on the right[3] is.

Let me add a brief note on style. Every normal human being can talk. These are the topics examined in this chapter. However, we must not be over-optimistic. Much of what is said in this chapter is based on his pioneering work. The hard part is to find out exactly what is innate. According to Ogden Nash, the behaviour of children and drunks is equally confusing. They are wired, he argues, with an innate knowledge of language universals. Surely there are other types of grammar which do not seem odd? Let me put you straight. One basic problem is that the link between the two may not be straightforward. It is equally hard to devise experiments to test it. In this general situation it would be over-optimistic to predict the future of the subject with any confidence. Psychological psycholinguists are sometimes divided into experimental psychologists and developmental psychologists. All social scientists work by forming and testing hypotheses.

Language universals, Chomsky suggests (1965), are of two basic types, substantive and formal. Substantive universals represent the fundamental 'building blocks' of language, the substance out of which it is made, while formal universals are concerned with the form or shape of a grammar. An analogy might make this distinction clearer. If, hypothetically, Eskimos were born with an innate knowledge of igloo building they would have two kinds of knowledge. On the one hand they would know in advance that the substance out of which igloos are made is ice and snow, just as thrushes automatically know that their nests are made of twigs, not bricks or worms or glass. On the other hand, their innate knowledge of igloo-building would include the information that igloos are round in shape, not square or diamond-shaped or sausage-like, just as thrushes instinctively build round nests, not ones shaped like bathtubs.

Since most native speakers of English would in fact agree that the set on the left above is not a coherent discourse, even though every sentence within it is well formed, and would agree that the set on the right is a coherent discourse, it must follow that there are identifiable characteristics of a coherent discourse which can be identified and classified.[4] Some of the elements of a discourse are, perhaps, fairly obvious; for example, the seventh sentence in the left bloc contains the pronoun 'he'. Native speakers know that the pronoun has to refer to an animate masculine proper noun somewhere in the near vicinity. The preceding sentence contains the masculine proper noun Ogden Nash, so a possible referent exists, but the semantic content of the two sentences appears to block any connection between them. The problem is complicated by the presence of two plural nouns in parallel position - *children* and *drunks* - in the sixth sentence in juxtaposition to the plural pronoun 'they' in the seventh sentence, creating an ambiguity. In short, pronoun reference, indeed all sorts of anaphora, operate intersententially across a discourse to unify it. In the true discourse bloc, on the right for example, repetition of *substantive* and *formal* (universals) in the first and second sentences acts to establish a relationship between those units. While the two terms occur in the second surface sentence, there are a number of ways in which that structure may have been realized as two surface sentences; indeed, the two parts of the second sentence, while presented as structures within a single sentence, are actually two notions independent of each other but dependent on the prior sentence.

Language universals...are of two basic types: substantive and formal -

Substantive universals represent...

Formal universals are concerned...

This brief discussion helps to establish the three kinds of structures with which it is necessary to deal in order to discuss coherent discourse: the discourse bloc, the discourse unit, and the bloc signal. A discourse bloc is a linguistic unit larger than sentence in which various smaller and more clearly sentential units (including, but not limited to, units marked as sentences) are connected by bloc signals into a semantically and logically coherent structure. Discourse units are 'free' and 'bound' syntactic structures interconnected by a variety of intersentential syntactic and semantic functions. Bloc signals are the intersentential syntactic and semantic functions which join discourse units into a discourse bloc[5] rather than the kind of unit illustrated in the left set in the examples above.

Characteristically, a discourse bloc has a stated or implied *topic*. If the topic is stated, it may occur as the first 'free' structure in the bloc or as a 'free' structure near the beginning of the bloc (although, if the logical structure of the bloc is deductive rather than inductive, it may also occur near the end of the bloc). If it is implied, it may be implied through the stated formal title of the bloc, or it may be inferred from information given in the bloc but never overtly abstracted into a statement.

Topic, whether stated or implied, has a set of characteristics which may be preliminarily identified. First, topic is likely to be either (1) definite or (2) generic.

1. Definite: The Ryuku Islands are closer to the Japanese mainland than to their neighbour islands geographically, ethnically, and linguistically.

2. Generic: Animals in general are inclined to join in groups.

In both the illustrations above, the 'topic' is expressed as a whole syntactic structure. Unlike other sentences in a discourse, the NP in a topic sentence carries new information[6]; it must, since it represents the onset of a communicative act, the first iteration of what is to be discussed. The VP of a topic sentence indicates the direction in which the new information will be carried. The new information in the NP of a topic sentence will have the characteristics of subject only when it constitutes the grammatical subject of that particular sentence and only in the context of that single sentence.

While topic often occurs as a complete sentence, it may also occur as a left-dislocated sentence modifier.

3. *On the platform*, the two men were talking. They discussed the weather, their jobs, their marriages.... [Locative prepositional element]

4. *According to Aunt Sally*, the twins had lied. The lie was slow in becoming apparent.... [Gerundive phrase]

5. *This tree*, it is beautiful, and I love it. My father grew it from a seed, and he left it to me when he died..... [Noun phrase]

It is also possible for the topic to occur in direct object position or in the position of postponed subject when subject position is occupied by some mechanism for permitting the subject to be moved to the right of the verb.

6. It is true that *many of the people of South Africa* have suffered, economically speaking, because of their political affiliations.

7. My father grew *this tree* from a seed. He nurtured it, and when he died, he left it to me. It is beautiful and I love it.

8. That's *my last Duchess* painted on the wall, looking as if she were alive.

Whether the topic element is in first position (as subject of the topic sentence or as the topic sentence itself) or whether it is displaced leftward or rightward appears to be a stylistic choice, determined by the relative emphasis the writer chooses to utilize.

In general, first position seems to be characteristic of straightforward exposition, while the displacements seem to signal a greater concern for style, sometimes to a concern so great that style becomes more important than content.

Generally, as noted above, topic is either definite or generic. In all of the examples cited above (3-8) the new material is definite. The notion of definiteness invoked here is that one developed by Hawkins[7] and utilized by Ts'ao in his study of topicalization in Chinese[8]. The definite topic constitutes a new referent introduced by the writer; thus definiteness helps to establish the communicative function of topic. In order for communication to occur, the new referent must constitute some commonly shared set between writer and reader; that, in turn implies that writer and reader agree on the real content of the set, on the fact that the topic given is part of the set, and on the fact that while the topic is part of the set it is a distinguishable entity within the set. In other words, the writer, lacking direct feedback as in the case of oral discourse, has to guess about presuppositions and the extent to which they may be shared. When the writer guesses badly, we say he has "missed his audience". When the writer guesses well, we don't say anything; we simply read with pleasure, or delight, or irritation what he has written.

In his analysis of definiteness, Hawkins notes four types: anaphoric, immediate, occurring in a larger context, and associative. It is likely that all four also occur with respect to the definite topic.

9. Anaphoric - see the right illustration on the first page of this article.

10. Immediate - Yesterday, my wife and I went to look at *a house on the peninsula*. The kitchen is exactly what she has been looking for. It has one of those 'work islands' right in the middle, with lots of space for hanging pots and plants. And the distance between the stove and the refrigerator is just right. The yard, on the other hand, isn't all that great. The grass hasn't been watered in months, and its just about all dead....[9]

11. Larger Context - *Presidential aide* Hamilton Jordan visited Panama Thursday to reassure Gen. Omar Torrijos that the White House is pressing for early ratification of the Panama Canal treaties, Administration sources said. According to the sources, Torrijos, *the Panamanian leader*, has become increasingly concerned in recent weeks over the prospects for U.S. ratification of the treaties....[10]

12. Associative - Yesterday I read an *article* about topicalization. The author is known to me. The content is awful, the subject is poorly treated, and the printing is illegible.[11]

As can be demonstrated in all of the examples cited, an important characteristic of topic is that it extends its domain over a string of syntactic elements following it, usually to the right in English. In example 10 above, by way of illustration, the notion 'house' extends its domain over all that follows since it must be understood that the kitchen described, and the yard, are sub-sets of the notion 'house'; similarly, in example 12, it must be understood that *author*, *content*, *subject*, and *printing* are all sub-sets of the notion 'article'. In example 3, a somewhat different phenomenon occurs; that is, the subjects under discussion by the men are not inherently sub-sets of 'on the platform'; rather, the locale itself is the topic, and the subjects under discussion are somehow controlled and focused by the locale. One can imagine that the treatment of the subjects by the actors might have been different if the locale were changed, for example to a bar, or the waiting room of a brothel. In example 4, it is not the fact that the twins had lied which is central; rather, what seems central is Aunt Sally's evaluation of the situation. In other words, it is not the lie nor the twins which are the topic; it is Aunt Sally's judgment. In brief, the topic extends its domain over a number of both free and bound syntactic forms which follow it. Its domination is reflected in pronominalization and relexification, in various other anaphoric devices, in simple repetition, through synonymy, as well as through certain transformational phenomena like nominalization, adjectivization, clefts and semi-clefts, and so on. It is important to note, however, that all of the functions described occur intersententially; similar phenomena occurring within the same discourse bloc but at the intrasentential level are not necessarily associated with the functioning of the topic but may be associated with the operation and focus of grammatical subjects other than the topic subject.

Topic also has a logical function. The relative truth value of comments on any given topic can only be determined by reference to the topic itself. In example 8 above, from Browning's famous poem, the truth value of a following assertion ("Fra Pandolf's hands worked busily a day, and there she stands.") can only be determined with reference to the topic notion. (Given that the topic and the following assertion come from an imaginative work, the question of whether Fra Pandolf - a real painter - really painted the picture which is a sub-set of the topic is moot.)

Finally, topic has a discourse function. Its discourse function is, in fact, a relational function, in the sense that topic serves as a bridge between knowledge in the mind of the author/writer, a presupposition about knowledge in the mind of the audience/reader, and what is about to be said/written/read. Now it has long been the practice of teachers of composition to describe the paragraph as a unit of thought, much as it was for many years the practice to describe sentence as "a group of words containing a subject and a predicate and expressing a complete thought". A sentence, except out of context, clearly does not express a complete thought, whether it has the other characteristics ascribed to it or not; a sentence, whether 'free' or 'bound', expresses part of the thought of some larger context. It does not take much looking to find lumps of contextuated discourse consisting of several paragraphs all controlled by a single topic; thus, it appears that a

paragraph also may not, except out of context, express a complete thought.

If one takes this essay as an example, the argument (regardless of its effectiveness) runs through the entire lump of discourse, although the lump consists, to this point, of 11 paragraphs of varying length and 56 sentences including this one, but excluding all the examples. (The examples are, to some extent, contextless sentences taken out of one context and embedded in another.) Since the excision of any one of the paragraphs, or indeed of any one of the sentences, would substantially modify the argument, and the addition of sentences or paragraphs at any random point would also change the argument, it may be contended that this lump of contextuated discourse is a unit of some sort. It may also be contended that this lump of discourse is dominated by a single topic (the sentence: "Characteristically, a discourse bloc has a stated or implied topic." which occurs at the head of the 5th paragraph). All the material in the first four paragraphs serves to develop a series of terms necessary to discuss the topic of this lump of discourse - that is, it serves to assure that commonly shared set necessary to communication between the writer (me) and the reader (you). All the material in the last 7 paragraphs serves to develop the definition of the notion *topic*. If you have read this far, you and I must be in some agreement, that there is a shared set, that the topic is part of the shared set and different enough from other items in the set to be distinguishable (and therefore discussable), and that the topic has in fact functioned both in a logical and in a discourse sense. In no way does this claim include any presumption of agreement between us; it merely assumes communication between us. If communication has occurred - that is, if the reader has perceived that this lump of discourse is contextuated - then there is reason also to presume that your notion of the characteristics of discourse also corresponds to some extent with mine, though we may argue about details.

On the other hand, it seems equally likely that an individual whose native language is not English may have had some difficulty in following this lump of discourse (depending, of course, upon his relative familiarity with English discourse). That claim implies only to a very small degree that the non-native-speaking reader would encounter some difficulty in dealing with the lexicon and syntax of this piece; it does imply that the non-native-speaking reader would have encountered some difficulty in perceiving what the topic is, in accepting the notion that the topic is an identifiable part of a shared set, and in receiving the logical and discourse functions of that topic.[12]

In summary, then, I want to contend that such things as discourse blocs do in fact exist, and that they are composed of discourse units glued together into a contextuated whole by bloc signals. Further, I want to contend that a discourse bloc is governed by a topic, that the topic is either stated or implied, and that the topic is either definite or generic. Finally, I want to contend that the topic has both a logical and a discourse function. While these notions must, in the absence of much greater empirical evidence, remain tentative, I want to suggest that topic is, in all

probability, a language (discourse) universal (since it not only occurs in a variety of other languages but is syntactically marked in some languages - which results in a quite different surface realization[13]). At the same time, since the surface realization of topic and the way in which it dominates dependent "free" and "bound" following syntactic units vary greatly from language to language, I want to argue that the generation and recognition of discourse blocs in a particular language must be explicitly taught to non-native-speaking readers/writers. In the end, it is possible that these contentions, if they have any validity, have implications for language teaching and particularly for teaching in the relatively new areas of scientific and technological discourse.

NOTES:

1. *The Anatomy of Rhetoric: Prolegomena to a Functional Theory of Rhetoric* [Philadelphia; The Center for Curriculum Development; 1972]; "A Further Note on Contrastive Rhetoric", *Communication Quarterly*, 24:2 (Spring 1976), pp. 12-19; "Contrastive Rhetoric: Some Hypotheses", forthcoming in *ITL*.

2. This corpus is taken from Jean Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics* [New York; Universe Books; 1977]. A sentence was randomly selected from the second paragraph of each chapter, including the Preface, the Introduction, and the Notes and Suggestions for Further Reading.

3. This corpus is taken from Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal*, pp. 94-95. The paragraph, quoted in full, was chosen at random.

4. Another kind of discontinuous discourse bloc can be illustrated by the following example taken from the comic strip "Broom Hilda" by Russell Myers:

"A Short Story"

> Once upon a time there was a lovely young princess who lived in a castle in a far-off mythical kingdom....
>
> The castle was designed by her uncle Hernando who was an architect in a nearby city. He was also a fine family man and was once an excellent swimmer.....
>
> He competed against Johnny Weismuller many times during the late 1920's. This was the time of the great depression during which many huge fortunes were lost...
>
> Fortunes that occasionally equalled the amount of treasure brought back from the orient centuries ago by Marco Polo. Or perhaps the total salaries, operating expenses, and advertising budgets of Kansas City Chiefs, Radio City Music Hall and Darlene's Dancing Dalmations...
>
> Next door to Hernando's office was a tattoo parlor. Many of our country's brave young fighting men went there for tattoos of their mothers, Barney Google, and Eleanor Roosevelt...

It was these same young men who displayed such courage on Bataan and Iwo Jima. The courage that made this country safe for you, me, our children, zoo animals and restoring old Hudsons as a hobby.....

Here, the semantic item in focus is not the one picked up in the following structures; rather typically an NP from a subordinated structure is picked up; e.g., *a castle* is picked up from a prepositional phrase in an adjectival clause, *the late 1920's*, becoming *the time of the great depression*, comes from the NP of an adverbial prepositional phrase. The sense of discontinuity is thus heightened through the absence of a topic, the absence of definiteness, and the taking of subsequent parts of what appears to be the topic set from units in positions which are not in focus, not to mention the dislocation caused by the maniacal treatment of time.

5. See "Contrastive Rhetoric: Some Hypotheses" for more detailed definitions.

6. Note that I am talking about topic as by definition extra-sentential; thus, the notion should not be confused with M.A.K. Halliday's notion of topic as developed in various of his works, notably in "Language Structure and Language Function", in J. Lyons (ed.), *New Horizons in Linguistics* (Baltimore; Penguin Books; 1970).

7. "Definiteness and Indefiniteness", unpublished Ph.D. Diss., Cambridge University, 1974.

8. "A Functional Study of Topic in Chinese: The First Step Toward Discourse Analysis", unpublished Ph.D. Diss., University of Southern California, 1977.

9. Abstracted from a personal letter received by the author from a friend.

10. *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1977, p.1. The Notion here is that since the text is intended for an American audience, it is not necessary to define what President the aide belongs to. Had the article appeared in the University of Southern California *Daily Trojan*, there would have been a possible ambiguity between the President of the United States and the President of the University. Had the article been printed in another country, it would have been necessary to identify the President as the current President of the United States, just as the writer of the example finds it necessary to identify General Torrijos as "the Panamanian leader". Hawkins contends, however, that some references seem to be in "permanent register"; that is, they transcend the larger context in the sense in which the text example defines it. Such items as *the sun, the moon, the planets*, etc., seem, then, to be in permanent register, that is, they are definite for everyone, regardless of locale or other special circumstances.

11. Source unidentified. Turned up in a student paper.

12. See, for example, the notion of language learning and the connection with culture developed by M.A.K. Halliday in *Learning How to Mean*. [London; Edward Arnold; 1975].

13. See for example, Ts'ao, "A Functional Study of Topic in Chinese"; Susumu Kuno, "Subject, Theme, and the Speaker's Empathy - A Re-Examination of Relativization Phenomena", in C. Li (ed.), *Subject and Topic* [New York; Academic Press; 1976].